



## K-12 Public Education through the Public's Eye: Voters' Perception of Public Education

### Introduction

Public education in New Orleans has undergone a number of major reforms since Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding that devastated the city in 2005. The state legislature expanded the role of the Recovery School District (RSD); the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) placed the majority of public schools in New Orleans under RSD. During the 2012-13 school year, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) is providing governance and oversight to 18 public schools (6 district-run and 12 charter schools) and RSD provides oversight to 68 schools (12 district-run and 56 charter schools). As a result, the governance of public schools in New Orleans is split between the two districts, 10 charter management organizations (CMOs) that oversee 40 charter schools, and a number of independent charter organizations.

In 2012-13, nearly 85 percent of public school students enrolled in charter schools. Public education in New Orleans is characterized by city-wide open enrollment. Students are no longer required to attend schools based on where they live. With no formalized attendance zones, parents are able to choose from among any school in the city. This school choice model is meant to provide a diverse portfolio of schools that allows parents to select the best fit school for their children.

It has been almost eight years since Katrina provided the catalyst for dramatic reforms, yet questions about long-term governance, the expansion of charter schools, and the effectiveness of school choice remain. The Cowen Institute commissioned this poll to assess voters' opinions and perceptions of public education

### Key Findings

#### There is strong support to bring in new charter operators for low-performing schools

- 65 percent agreed that bringing in a charter organization to take over a failing school creates the best chance to improve student learning
- 66 percent agreed that charter schools that persistently receive a school performance score of a D should be taken over by a different charter management organization

#### There is strong support for school choice

- 54 percent felt that parents should be able to send their child to any open enrollment school in New Orleans
- 50 percent agreed that school choice has had a positive impact on the quality of public education in New Orleans

#### There is no consensus on if and when to return all RSD schools to OPSB

- Majority of African Americans say RSD schools should return to OPSB within two years
- Majority of white and others say RSD schools should not return to OPSB

#### There is strong support for changes to the school board

- 64 percent said OPSB should change the way it operates if schools are mandated to return
- There is a strong preference for a local school board with some elected and some appointed members

#### Although 37 percent feel public schools are better after Katrina, responses varied by ethnicity

- 53 percent of white and others said public schools are better after Katrina
- 29 percent of African Americans said public schools are better after Katrina



reform and the future direction of public education in New Orleans. Giving voice to the community, through the voter poll, is critical to sustaining transformational change.

## Methodology

This public opinion poll is the fourth survey commissioned by the Cowen Institute to gauge public opinion about the issues facing public education in New Orleans.

The 2013 poll was conducted by phone between the dates of March 15 - 25, 2013 by Market Research Insights, a nationally recognized research firm; it consisted of two surveys, one with 294 randomly selected registered voters in Orleans Parish and another with 250 parents of school-aged children enrolled in either public or private schools. The parent survey included additional questions and will be presented and analyzed in a separate report. This report provides an analysis of the voter sample population only and includes responses from 294 registered voters; 65 percent of respondents were African American, 33 percent were white, 1.7 percent were Hispanic, and 0.7 percent were Asian, closely matching the ethnic distribution of adult residents in the city.

Although the survey sample closely matches the ethnic distribution of residents in New Orleans, the population of registered voters from which the sample was pulled is somewhat different from adult residents in New Orleans as a whole. Registered voters tend to be slightly older and have slightly higher levels of education attainment on average. However, voter lists provide the most comprehensive list of residents that is readily available and is the common standard used in survey research. Furthermore, because voters decide the outcome of elections, their opinions are heard by elected officials who are responsible for decision-making affecting public education.

Of the representative voter sample included in this analysis, 15 percent were parents of a

school-aged child, with 68 percent of parents reporting that their child was enrolled in a public school. Public schools include district-run and charter schools operated by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), the Recovery School District (RSD), and charter schools overseen by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE).

Demographics	2013 Sample	Adult Population*
African American	65%	60%
White	33%	31%
Other	2%	9%

\* US Census Bureau, Orleans Parish population estimates

The questions included in this survey focused primarily on general satisfaction, governance, charter schools, and school choice. For the majority of questions in the surveys, a Likert scale was used to measure respondents' attitudes and perceptions by asking the extent to which the respondent agreed or disagreed with the provided statement. Responses for all voters surveyed are provided in this report. Responses were disaggregated by ethnicity\* and provided when significant differences occurred.

## Survey Results

### General Satisfaction

Because of the dramatic overhaul of public education that has occurred after Katrina, the survey asked respondents if they felt that public schools in New Orleans were better before Katrina, are better after Katrina, or are about the same before and after.

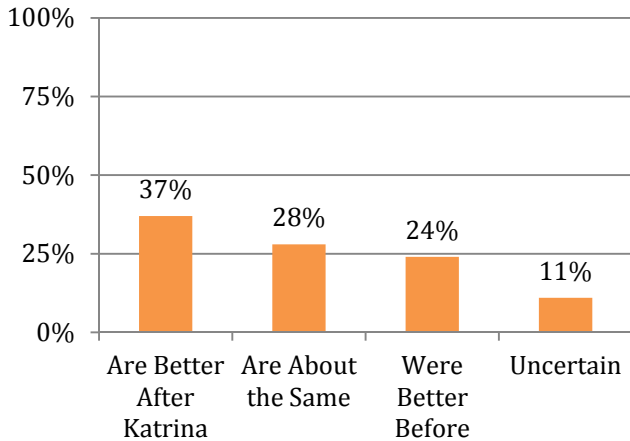
*Overall, would you say that public schools in New Orleans are better after Katrina, were better before Katrina, or about the same before or after?*

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\* White, Hispanic, and Asian respondents were aggregated in the ethnicity category and are referred to as "white and other."

In 2013, of the voters surveyed, 37 percent felt that public schools in New Orleans are better after Katrina; 24 percent of the voters surveyed felt that public schools were better before Katrina, and 28 percent felt schools are about the same before and after Katrina.

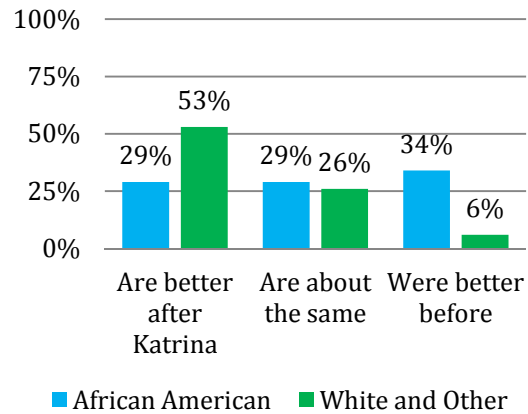
**Public Schools in New Orleans:**



By ethnicity, white and others were positive about the changes in public education since Katrina. More than half (53 percent) of white and other ethnicities said that public schools are better after Katrina, 26 percent said that public schools are about the same before and after, and only 6 percent of white and other ethnic respondents said that public schools were better before Katrina.

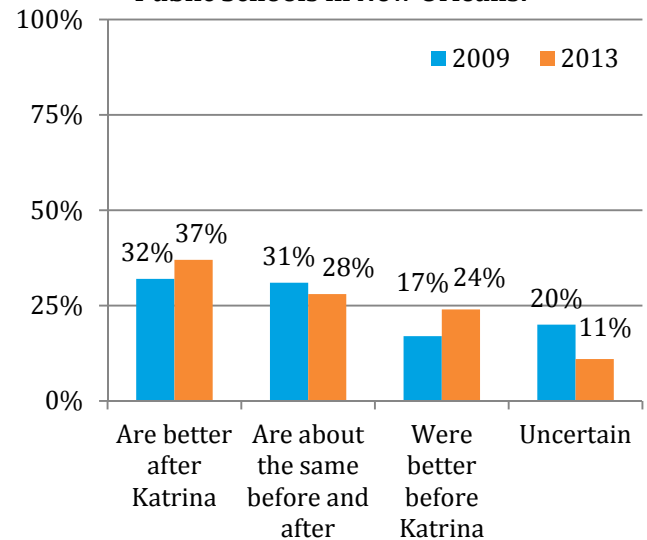
African American respondents were less positive about the quality of public schools. Of African Americans surveyed, 29 percent said that schools are better after Katrina, 29 percent said that schools were about the same before and after, and 34 percent said that public schools were better before Katrina.

**Public schools in New Orleans:**



When asked the same question in 2009†, 32 percent of voters polled said public schools are better after Katrina, 31 percent said public schools were the same before and after, and 17 percent said public schools were better before Katrina. In 2013, 37 percent said public schools are better after Katrina, 28 percent said schools are about the same before and after, and 24 percent said public schools were better before Katrina.

**Public Schools in New Orleans:**



† Because the samples and methodology used in 2009 and 2013 were the same, a comparison between the two surveys can be made; the 2010 sample included an over-representation of parents and caregivers of public school students and 2011 survey included only parents.

## General Satisfaction Conclusion

Overall, 37 percent of voters surveyed said public schools in New Orleans are better after Katrina. However, nearly eight years later, asking current residents to reflect on the quality of public schools before and after Hurricane Katrina is somewhat complicated. No measures of whether or not respondents were residents or had experiences with schools before Katrina were included in the survey. Furthermore, as more time passes, the distinction between public schools before and after Katrina is not as relevant as whether the current public education reforms are improving the quality of public schools.

## Governance

The question of long-term governance remains an important issue. RSD schools are eligible to return to OPSB if, after five years under RSD, they meet academic-based criteria, have the support of their charter board for returning, and obtain approval by BESE to regain a relationship with OPSB. In 2012-13, 13 RSD charter schools met the criteria to return to local control; none chose to return. The charter boards of the eligible schools have elected to remain under RSD for the 2013-14 school year.

*Currently the state-run RSD maintains oversight of the majority of public schools in Orleans Parish. Do you think all RSD schools should be returned to OPSB?*

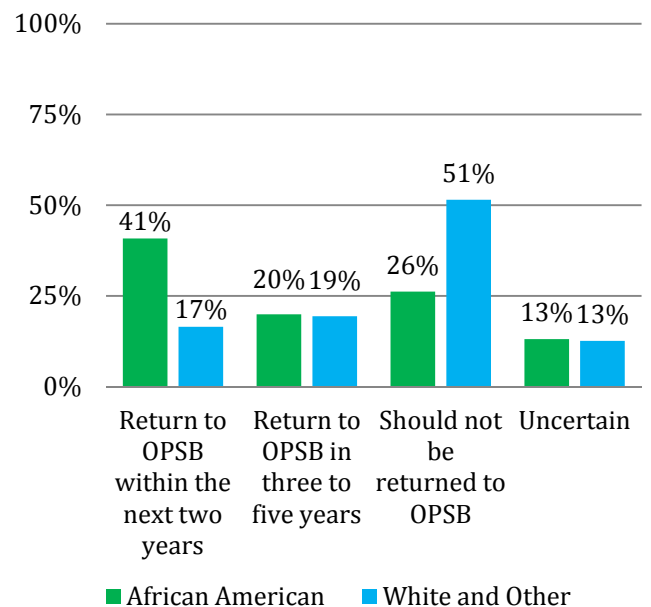
Opinions were split on the return of all RSD schools to OPSB. About one-third (32 percent) felt that all RSD schools should return within two years. One-fifth (20 percent) of respondents felt all RSD schools should be returned to OPSB in the next three to five years. One-third (35 percent) of respondents felt that no RSD schools should return; 13 percent were uncertain.

### Currently the state-run RSD maintains oversight of the majority of public schools in Orleans Parish. Do you think all RSD schools:

Should return to OPSB within the next two years	32%
Should return to OPSB in the next three to five years	20%
Should NOT return to OPSB	35%
Uncertain	13%

There was a significant difference in responses by ethnicity. African American voters feel more urgency regarding the return of all RSD schools to OPSB. Of African Americans polled, 41 percent thought all RSD schools should return within two years, compared to 17 percent of white and other voters. Conversely, white and other voters were nearly twice as likely to say that all RSD schools should not be returned to OPSB.

### Currently RSD maintains oversight of the majority of schools. Do you think all RSD schools should...



*If all schools were mandated to return to OPSB, should OPSB change or do you think the current way OPSB is structured and functions is acceptable to manage all schools in New Orleans?*

Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of voters surveyed said OPSB should change. Nineteen percent said OPSB does not need to change and 17 percent were uncertain. There was not a significant difference by ethnicity.

<b>If all schools were mandated to return to OPSB, should OPSB change or do you think the current way OPSB is structured and functions is acceptable to manage all schools?</b>	
Should change	64%
Does not need to change	19%
Uncertain	17%

Of all respondents who felt OPSB should change, we asked what changes were needed. They provided a mix of responses to this open-ended question. Among the various ways were (in no particular order):

- *Improve Board Accountability and Transparency:* financial accountability, resource allocation, independent third-party oversight, open door policy
- *Improve Board Collaboration and Relationships:* get politics out of board business; members should get along with each other, the community, parents, educators (school leaders and teachers) and business leaders
- *Require Board Member Qualifications:* education and finance backgrounds, knowledge of school operations and financing, no career politicians
- *Increase Focus on Student Learning:* focus on student learning, curriculum, safety, and

teacher quality; identify what works and then support and expand what works; identify and develop successful models; support all schools and provide adequate resources

- *Improve board policies and procedures:* review personnel policies, teacher hiring and evaluation
- *Change Board (Make-up) Structure:* define scope of power, appointed versus elected members, more members, term limits

*Does the recently elected OPSB give you more, less, or the same level of confidence in OPSB's ability to govern public schools in New Orleans?*

On November 6, 2012, voters in Orleans Parish elected representatives to serve on seven school board seats. Three incumbents were re-elected to serve an additional four-year term, three incumbents were defeated, and one seat was unopposed.

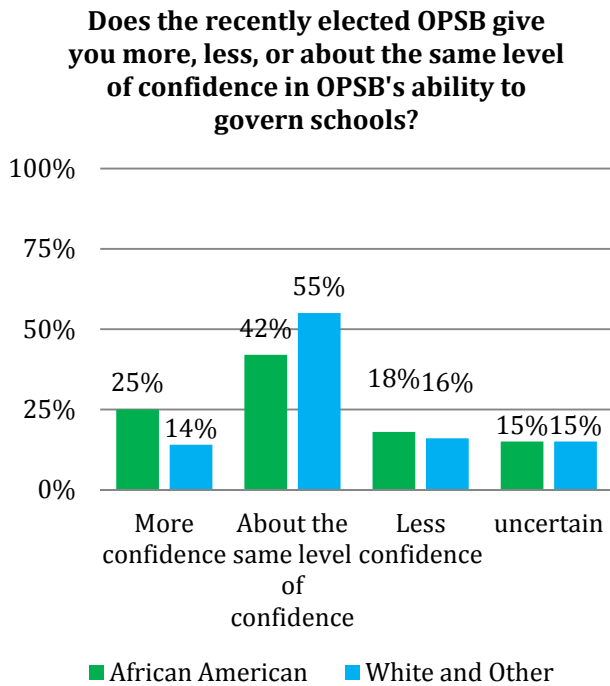
<b>Does the recently elected OPSB give you more, less, or about the same level of confidence in OPSB's ability to govern schools?</b>	
About the same level of confidence in OPSB's ability to govern schools	47%
More confidence in OPSB's ability to govern schools	21%
Less confidence in OPSB's ability to govern schools	17%
Uncertain/No Opinion	15%

Nearly half (47 percent) of respondents reported about the same level of confidence in OPSB; 21 percent of survey respondents reported more confidence and 17 percent reported less confidence.

Although the majority of both African American and white and other voters reported that they had about the same level of confidence in the newly elected OPSB, slightly more African Americans reported more confidence, 25 percent



compared to 14 percent of white and other voters. Forty-two percent of African American voters and 55 percent of white and other voters reported about the same level of confidence. About the same percentage (18 percent of African Americans and 16 percent of white and other voters) reported having less confidence in the newly elected OPSB.



*Although charter schools in New Orleans are required to have a board made up of local community members, BESE or OPSB provides oversight. In terms of long-term governance, who do you think should have oversight of charter school boards?*

When asked to select among BESE, OPSB, a blended board with some elected and some appointed members, or a board appointed by the mayor, respondents favored the blended governance model. Of those surveyed, 41 percent felt that a local school board made up of some elected and some appointed members should have oversight of charter school boards. About one in five voters surveyed (22 percent) felt that BESE should maintain oversight over charter

school boards. Only 16 percent felt OPSB should have oversight. In many cities, such as Chicago, the mayor is solely responsible for appointing members to the local school board; of voters surveyed in New Orleans, only 9 percent favored a mayoral control and appointment of the local school board. There was no difference by ethnicity.

<b>In terms of long-term governance, who should have oversight of charter school boards?</b>	
BESE	22%
OPSB	16%
A local school board with some elected and some appointed members	41%
A local school board with all members appointed by the mayor	9%
Uncertain/No opinion	12%

### Governance Conclusion

In terms of governance, based on the results of the 2013 poll, voters have developed a level of comfort with the current bifurcated governance model. There is not a consensus about if and when all RSD schools should return to OPSB. Nearly one-third (32 percent) felt a sense of urgency for return of RSD schools to OPSB within the next two years, one-fifth (20 percent) support return in the longer term, 35 percent were against the return of schools to OPSB. If RSD schools were mandated to return, nearly two-thirds of respondents (64 percent) said that OPSB should change. When asked specifically who should have oversight of charter school boards, only 16 percent said OPSB. Forty-one percent favored a blended board where some members are elected and some are appointed.

## Charter Schools and Choice

### Charter Schools

Based on October 2012 enrollment, almost 85% of public school students in New Orleans are enrolled in charter schools.

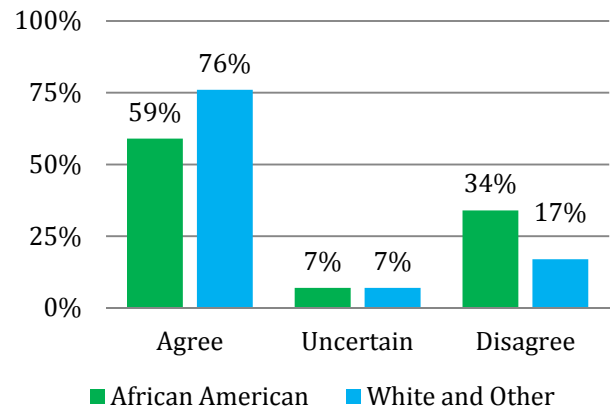
*Over the past few years, RSD has turned over chronically failing schools to charter organizations to re-start the school. Do you agree/disagree that bringing in a charter organization to take over the failing school creates the best chance to improve student learning?*

Overall, voters support charter organizations taking over failing schools. Two-thirds (65 percent) agreed that bringing in a charter organization creates the best chance to improve student learning. About one-quarter (28 percent) of respondents disagreed and 7 percent were uncertain.

<b>Do you agree or disagree that bringing in a charter organization to take over a failing school creates the best chance to improve student learning?</b>	
Strongly agree	38%
Somewhat agree	27%
Uncertain	7%
Somewhat disagree	11%
Strongly disagree	17%

There was some difference in degree of support for charter schools by ethnicity. White and other voters showed strong support; 76 percent said that bringing in a charter organization to take over a failing school creates the best chance to improve student learning, whereas only 59 percent of African Americans agreed. On the other hand, African Americans were twice as likely to disagree, 34 compared to 17 percent of white and other voters.

### **Do you agree/disagree that bringing in a charter organization to take over a failing school creates the best chance to improve student learning?**



*There are certain standards for charter organizations that are approved to take over poorly performing schools. RSD only approves charter organizations who have demonstrated success in operating other schools. Do you agree or disagree with this policy?*

Two-thirds (66 percent) of voters surveyed agreed with RSD policy that only charter organizations who have demonstrated success in operating other schools should be approved to take over poorly performing schools. About one-quarter (26 percent) of voters disagreed. And 8 percent were uncertain. There was not a significant difference in responses by ethnicity.

<b>There are certain standards for charter organizations that are approved to take over poorly performing schools. RSD only approves charter organizations who have demonstrated success in operating other schools. Do you agree or disagree with the policy?</b>	
Strongly agree	41%
Somewhat agree	25%
Uncertain	8%
Somewhat disagree	12%
Strongly disagree	14%

*Under the RSD standard, community-based organizations with no experience operating schools can apply to start a new school but cannot take over an existing low-performing school. Do you agree or disagree with this policy?*

Survey respondents were split in support of this RSD standard with 45 percent who agreed and 45 percent who disagreed. Eleven percent were uncertain. Similar results were seen in the responses by ethnicity with no significant differences.

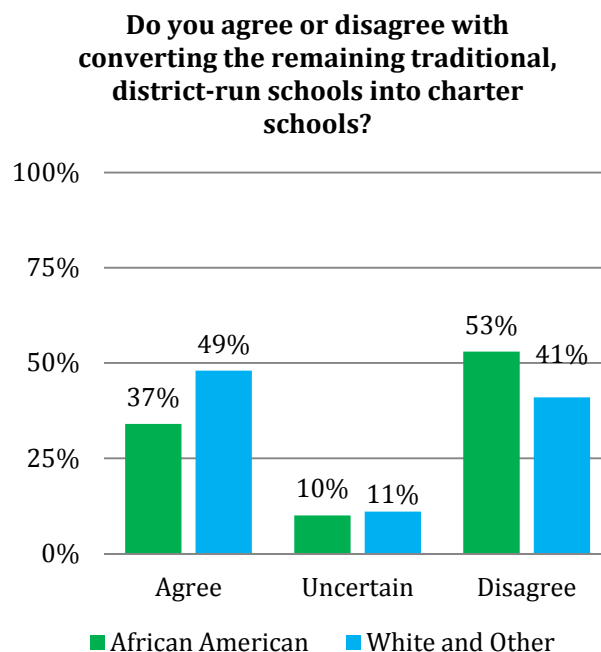
<b>Under the RSD standard, community-based organizations with no experience operating schools cannot take over an existing low-performing school. Do you agree or disagree?</b>	
Strongly agree	18%
Somewhat agree	27%
Uncertain	11%
Somewhat disagree	18%
Strongly disagree	27%

*Next year, there will be 85 public schools in Orleans Parish, with only 10 directly run by a school district. Do you agree or disagree with converting the remaining traditional, district-run schools into charter schools?*

Again, voter opinions were split. Of all those surveyed, 41 percent favored converting the remaining traditional, district-run schools into public charter schools. Forty-nine percent disagreed that the remaining traditional, district-run schools should be converted into charter schools.

<b>Next year there will be 85 public schools in Orleans Parish, with only 10 directly run by a district. Do you agree or disagree with converting the remaining traditional, district-run schools into charter schools?</b>	
Strongly agree	26%
Somewhat agree	15%
Uncertain	11%
Somewhat disagree	19%
Strongly disagree	30%

There was significant variation by ethnicity. More African Americans (53 percent) disagreed compared to 41 percent of white and others. Whites and others were more supportive of converting the remaining traditional, district-run schools into charter schools (49 percent compared to 37 percent of African Americans surveyed.)



*Do you agree or disagree that charter schools that persistently receive a school performance score of a D should be taken over by a different charter management organization?*

Two-thirds (66 percent) of respondents agreed that schools that persistently receive a performance score of D should be taken over by a different charter management organization. Twenty-four percent of those surveyed disagreed and 10 percent were uncertain. There was not a significant difference in responses by ethnicity.



<b>Do you agree or disagree that charter schools that persistently receive a SPS of D should be taken over by a different charter management organization?</b>	
Strongly agree	45%
Somewhat agree	21%
Uncertain	10%
Somewhat disagree	11%
Strongly disagree	13%

### Charter School Conclusion

Voters support the current charter strategy; 65 percent felt that bringing in a charter organization to take over a failing school creates the best chance to improve student learning, although African American voters were less likely to agree (42 percent). Two-thirds of all respondents agreed that charter schools that persistently receive a D should change charter management organizations. Experience is important; 65 percent of voters support the policy that allows only schools that have demonstrated success in operating schools to take over of existing failing schools. Survey results are split on whether or not community-based organizations with no experience should be approved to take over an existing low-performing school. There was no real sense of urgency to convert the remaining traditional, direct-run schools into charter schools.

### Choice

Following Katrina, public schools in New Orleans adopted a policy of school choice; geographic school zones were abolished. Parents can apply to any public school in the city regardless of where they live.

*Orleans Parish has a policy of school choice and open enrollment, where parents are able to apply to any public school in the city; students are not automatically assigned to their neighborhood school. For K-8 schools, do you think parents should be able to send their child to any open enrollment school with no geographic restrictions*

*or 50 percent of seats in schools should be reserved for students who live in the neighborhood, or neighborhood attendance zones should be re-established and students should be assigned to their neighborhood school?*

Almost three-quarters (72 percent) of respondents supported school choice; 54 percent felt that parents should be able to send their child to any open enrollment school in New Orleans with no geographic restrictions and 18 percent supported a blended approach where 50 percent of seats would be reserved for students who live in the neighborhood and 50 percent of seat would be open to students regardless of where they live. Conversely, 21 percent of respondents felt that neighborhood attendance zones should be re-established and students should be assigned to their neighborhood school. There was no significant difference in preferences by ethnicity.

<b>Orleans Parish has a policy of school choice and open enrollment, where parents are able to apply to any public school in the city; students are not automatically assigned to their neighborhood school. For k-8 schools, do you think:</b>	
Parents should be able to send their child to any open enrollment school in New Orleans with no geographic restrictions	54%
50 percent of seats should be reserved for student who live in the neighborhood	18%
Neighborhood attendance zones should be re-established and students should be assigned to their neighborhood school	21%
Uncertain	6%

*Do you think allowing parents to apply for their students to enroll in any public school in New Orleans has had a positive impact, a negative*

*impact, or no impact on the quality of education in New Orleans?*

Half of all respondents felt that school choice has had a positive impact on the quality of public education in New Orleans. Twenty-three percent felt that school choice has had no impact and 14 percent of those surveyed said school choice has had a negative impact. There was no significant difference in responses by ethnicity.

<b>Do you think allowing parents to apply for their students to enroll in any public school in New Orleans has had a positive impact, a negative impact, or no impact on the quality of education in New Orleans?</b>	
A positive impact	50%
No impact	23%
A negative impact	14%
Uncertain/No opinion	13%

#### School Choice Conclusion

School choice garnered support in the 2013 voter poll. The majority of respondents felt that parents should be able to send their children to any open enrollment public school in the city with no geographic restrictions. The majority of respondents also felt that providing parents with choice had a positive impact on the quality of education in New Orleans.

### Overall Conclusion

The Cowen Institute poll provides an opportunity to assess public opinion on the issues facing public education in New Orleans. Voters are generally supportive of the reforms that were implemented following Katrina. Voters support charter schools and think that turning over a failing school to a charter organization creates the best chance of improving student learning, although there was a difference in the degree of support from African American versus

white and other voters polled. There is a sense of increased accountability; voters support changing charter operators when schools do not perform satisfactorily. Despite support for charter schools, there was no clear call to convert the few remaining traditional, district-run schools into charter schools.

Voters support school choice and believe that parents should be able to apply to enroll their children in any school in New Orleans regardless of where they live. Half of those surveyed believe that school choice has had a positive impact on the quality of public education in New Orleans.

In addition, there seems to be a sense of comfort in the bifurcated governance model where the majority of schools fall under the oversight of RSD. There is not a clear consensus of if and when all RSD schools should return to OPSB, although significantly more African American voters support a timely return; more than half of all white and others are against the return of all RSD schools to OPSB. But if schools were mandated to return, voters think OPSB should change, both operationally and structurally. There was support for a blended board with some elected and some appointed members. In addition, the newly elected OPSB did not give voters more confidence in OPSB's ability to govern schools.

A plurality of voters continues to believe that public schools in New Orleans are better after Katrina. There was a difference, however, by voter ethnicity; the majority of white and others believe public schools are better after Katrina, but only one-third of African Americans believe schools are better after the storm.



The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University is an action oriented think tank that informs and advances research-based policy, legislative, and programmatic solutions to eliminate the challenges impeding the success of K-12 education in New Orleans and beyond.



### **Applied Research at the Cowen Institute**

We serve as an objective voice to education leaders, policymakers, the media, and the public about what is taking place in public education in New Orleans—particularly in the areas of accountability, finance, facilities, and governance—by disseminating relevant data and research. This publication, and others released in the past, can be found at <http://education.tulane.edu>.

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